

Missouri's Skunks

A Guide to Nuisance Prevention
and Damage Control



Missouri Department of Conservation

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The striped skunk is the most commonly found skunk in Missouri.

INTRODUCTION

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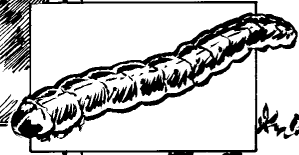
*Striped skunks produce one litter each year,
with an average litter size of four to six.*

LIFE HISTORY

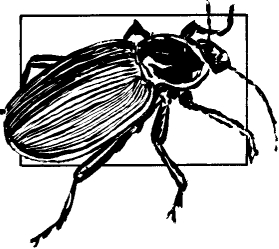
White grub



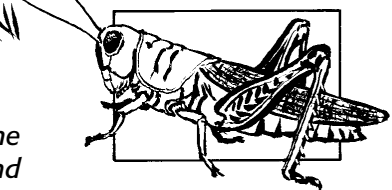
Cutworm



Beetle



Grasshopper



Striped skunks depend on insects for food during the summer months. Many of these insects can be found in lawns around houses.

Two species of skunks are found in Missouri, the striped skunk and the eastern spotted skunk. The larger, more common striped skunk is found throughout Missouri and is one of our most recognizable wild mammals. It is a medium-sized, stout-bodied animal with a small head, short legs and a prominent long-haired tail, weighing from 3 1/2 to 10 pounds. The body is black with a white stripe down each side of the back that merges just above the shoulders and ends with a patch of white fur on the head. Some striped skunks have more white on them than others. In a few cases, skunks have only a white patch on the top of the head.

Probably because of land use changes, eastern spotted skunks, or civet cats, are rarely seen in Missouri. Insecticides and other

chemicals sprayed on crops also may have contributed to their disappearance in north Missouri. The spotted skunk has black fur with white spots and is still found in small numbers in the Ozark Highland region of south Missouri. The spotted skunk is rare, legally protected and causes few problems in Missouri.

Habitat

Striped skunks can be found almost anywhere in Missouri. While they prefer forest borders, fence rows, edges of crop fields and open grassy fields, they often live in towns and the suburbs of larger cities. Skunks usually live in burrows or dens that they dig themselves, or that are abandoned by other animals like groundhogs or badgers. Skunks commonly take up

residence under farm houses and homes at the edge of towns and cities where they have a food source nearby.

Feeding habits

Skunks eat a variety of plants and animals during the fall and winter, but depend on insects during the summer months. Grasshoppers, beetles and crickets are preferred summer foods. White grubs, cutworms, tobacco worms and other insect larvae also are commonly eaten.

Striped skunks prey on mice, rats, moles, shrews, ground squirrels, young rabbits, chipmunks, lizards, salamanders, frogs, earthworms and turtle eggs. The larger mammals usually are eaten as carrion, while the smaller ones

are caught by the skunks. The young and eggs of ground-nest birds are sometimes taken. Striped skunks also will eat table scrap and dog and cat food when they are available. Several different kinds of fruit are consumed along with some grasses, leaves, buds, roots and grain.

Reproduction and behavior

The breeding season of striped skunks begins in late February. The gestation period is seven to eight weeks. Skunks produce one litter each year, with an average litter size of four to six. Litters of two to 16 young, however, have been recorded. The female rears the young alone and the litter stays with her until fall.

Skunks are mostly nocturnal but may sometimes be seen during the day. The home range of skunks is 1/2 to 2 miles in diameter, but they may range only 1/4 to 1/2 mile while foraging for food at night. Skunks are often inactive for long periods of time during cold weather. However, warm winter weather may bring them out at night to hunt for food. Several skunks often occupy the same den during the winter months.

Economic value

At one time, some farm boys made their spending money by hunting and trapping skunks for their fur. They were able to make more money from the sale of skunk pelts than from working as a hired hand on neighboring farms, but not without cost. In those days, many a boy was sent home by an unsympathetic teacher because of the odor he brought into the school.



The endangered spotted skunk cannot be legally hunted or trapped. Spotted skunks are so rare that they seldom cause problems. If they are a nuisance, special permission is required before they can be shot or trapped.

Skunk pelts are no longer sought by fur trappers in Missouri because low pelt prices make the chance of getting sprayed not worth the bother. Today, most skunks that are trapped are a result of nuisance problems.

Legal status

The spotted skunk has been placed on the endangered species list in Missouri and cannot be legally hunted or trapped. Because they are so rare, they seldom cause problems. If they do, special permission is required before they can be shot or trapped.

Striped skunks, on the other

hand, can be hunted or trapped during the legal season.

If a striped skunk is causing problems at other times, landowners or someone acting on their behalf may shoot or trap the skunk according to the provisions listed in Rule 4.130 of the *Wildlife Code of Missouri*. Under these provisions the skunks may be shot or trapped only on the landowner's property. Problem skunks captured or killed out of season may not be used, transported or given away, and must be reported to an agent of the Conservation Department within 24 hours and disposed of in accordance with the agent's instructions.

TYPES OF NUISANCE PROBLEMS

Skunks sometimes cause problems by digging for grubs or other insect larvae in lawns, golf courses or cemeteries. Although skunks usually dig small 1- or 2-inch diameter holes a few inches deep, they may cause extensive damage if insects are abundant.

Skunks can cause problems by burrowing under concrete walks or steps. They also may damage shrubbery around a house when they dig under its foundation.

Odors

Skunk odor can be one of the most troublesome of all wildlife nuisance problems. Skunks can emit this odor any time of the year, but do it more commonly in late February during mating season when males are trying to attract females or fighting with other males.

When the musk odor is emitted under a house, it can be strong enough to cause people to miss work, temporarily move out of their house, or cause their children to be sent home from school. Sometimes the family dog encounters a skunk in the yard, gets sprayed and must be banished from human company until thoroughly deodorized.

Skunk odor can be dealt with, but it helps to have some understanding of skunks, their musk glands and the musk they produce. Skunks are members of the weasel family, which includes weasels, mink, river otters, badgers, pine marten and fishers. Each animal in the weasel family has its own distinctive musk or scent.

The striped skunk has the strongest and most disagreeable smelling musk of any animal in Missouri. The musk of the spotted skunk has a different smell, but is



On a golf course, skunks digging for grubs can require increased maintenance of fairways and greens.

just as disagreeable. To some people, the slight smell of skunk musk on a cool fall night may be enjoyable, but to others it is anything but pleasant. There is probably no one who enjoys the smell of skunk if it permeates their house or clothes.

On the positive side, skunk musk has been used for years by trappers to make trapping lures for trapping foxes, coyotes and other animals and was once used by the perfume trade as a fixative.

Some people think these animals smell bad, but actually the skunk itself has very little, unpleasant odor about its body or den. The musk or odor is secreted by paired glands located on either side of the anus. Small jets located just inside the anal opening are controlled by the skunk to discharge when it is frightened, threatened or injured.

The musk is an amber-colored fluid, and an ounce or more is stored in each of the paired glands. Skunks use their musk primarily for defense and to attract mates. A healthy skunk doesn't discharge

musk until it is in a close encounter with an enemy.

When skunks are threatened, they may stamp their feet, throw their tail up and turn their backside toward the enemy. The musk is discharged in a spray of tiny oily particles and can be accurately sprayed 5 to 10 feet or more, or carried on the wind for a mile or more. The musk thrown into the face of a person or another animal can cause temporary blindness.

Disease

Skunks are sometimes infected with rabies; and any animal that appears sick or exhibiting bold, aggressive or erratic behavior, especially in the daytime, should be avoided. The local police department, animal control officer or a representative of the Conservation Department should be notified immediately.

Because skunks are susceptible to other diseases, the appearance of a sick skunk doesn't necessarily mean that it is rabid. However, all precautions should be taken until the status is determined.

PREVENTION AND CONTROL OF SKUNK PROBLEMS

The best preventive measures to keep skunks from digging under a house or around a farmstead include:

- ✓ keeping the area free of brush and debris piles
- ✓ sealing all openings in the foundations of houses and outbuildings
- ✓ installing a welded-wire apron around foundations.

If you have skunks under your house or outbuildings, sealing holes in the foundations should be done only if you are certain that there are no skunks under the house. By sprinkling flour in front of all access holes and leaving it for a few days, you can tell whether skunks are still using the site, and whether they are in or out.

If the foundation is securely sealed off and a skunk is trapped under the house, it will eventually die. The musk will be released from the glands as the skunk decomposes and will permeate the house.

Occasionally a skunk may die of natural causes under a house and cause odor problems. When this happens, crawl under the house and scoop up the dead skunk with a shovel and place it in a plastic bag to transport it away from the house. Treat the area where the skunk was found with a heavy application of lime, strong deodorizer or both. See page 10 for a formula for making a deodorizing solution.

No repellents available today will keep skunks away from houses or drive them from a house once they

have taken up residence. Although moth balls or moth ball crystals are sometimes applied at the entrances to holes to discourage use by skunks, moth balls do not seem to be an effective deterrent and can be a health hazard if the fumes are inhaled over a long period of time.

Using water to move skunks

Sometimes skunks dig a burrow 4-6 inches in diameter under concrete walks or steps. These tunnels lead to the animal's nest where it stays during the day. The use of water can be an easy, effective way to get the skunk to abandon this den, if it can be done without damaging nearby buildings.

Because skunks are nocturnal, wait until dark when the skunk has left to hunt for food. Then run water into the hole with a garden hose to thoroughly wet the entrance and the nest.

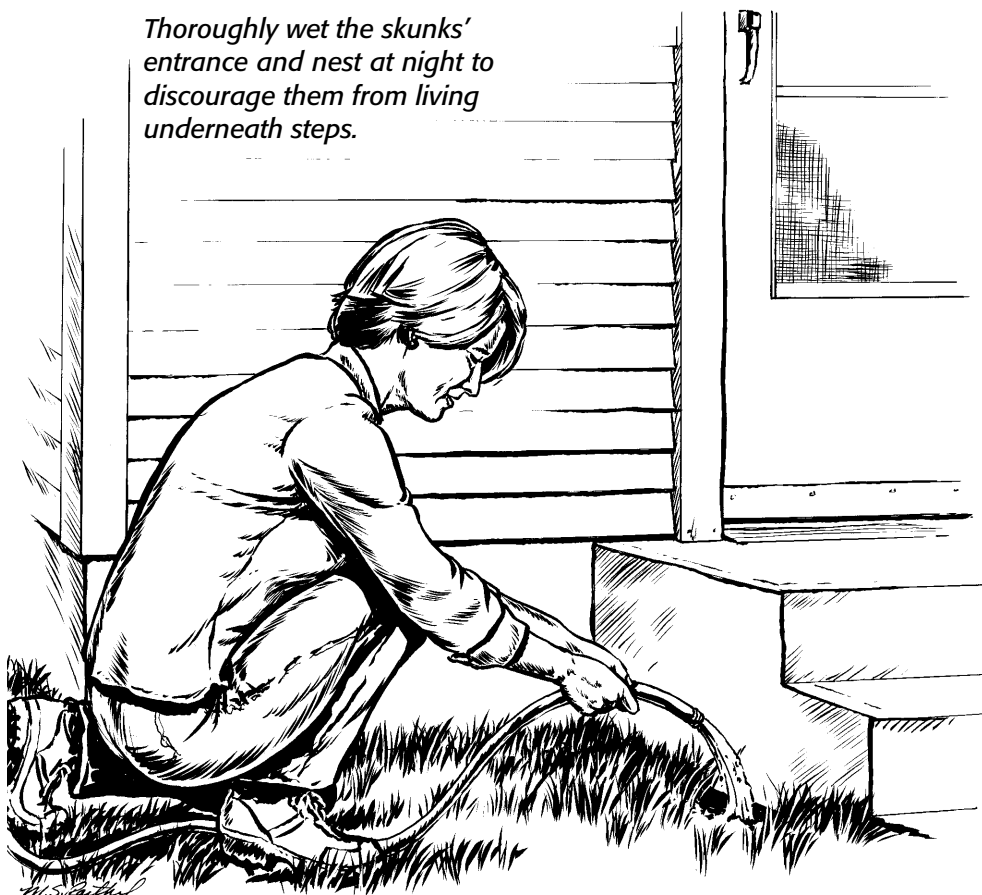
Shooting

It is often tempting to shoot a problem skunk that is in the yard or is caught in a wire cage trap. Shooting should only be done if the skunk is sick, thought to be rabid or is frequenting a heavy traffic area, such as a golf course, where there is a high likelihood of it spraying people or pets.

Because skunks release their odor when shot, shooting should be the last resort in areas where the smell would be a problem. While it is possible to place a bullet in the upper spinal column where it will kill the skunk without releasing an odor, it is extremely difficult to do, even for experienced shooters.

Shooting problem skunks during

Thoroughly wet the skunks' entrance and nest at night to discourage them from living underneath steps.



the mating season is an especially bad idea because the released odor may attract even more skunks to the area.

Helping skunks get out of holes, window wells

Young skunks sometimes fall into window wells or similar places and cannot climb out. They also may get into a crawl space under a house or in a basement by coming in through the window well or through an open door. A skunk in a window well or hole can sometimes be freed by placing a slanting board into the hole and letting the skunk crawl out on its own.

Another approach is to place a cardboard box in a window well so the skunk can use it for a hiding place. First, tape the top and bottom of the box securely shut. In

one corner, cut an opening with a door flap that is large enough for the skunk to enter easily. Open the door flap and slowly place the box in the hole so the box is in a corner and the open door is next to a wall. See drawing below.

If all movements are slow and methodical, the skunk should remain calm and not spray. Talk to the skunk in a soothing voice, as if speaking to your dog or cat. If the skunk throws its tail up and backs toward you, stop all movement until it calms down.

With a broom or a board, use slow, gentle movements to guide the skunk toward the door opening and into the box. If the skunk resists, leave for a while to allow the skunk to find its own way into the box. Once the skunk is inside, push the door flap shut and secure it with strong tape. When moving the box, do it slowly and gently. If the skunk will not be euthanized, it

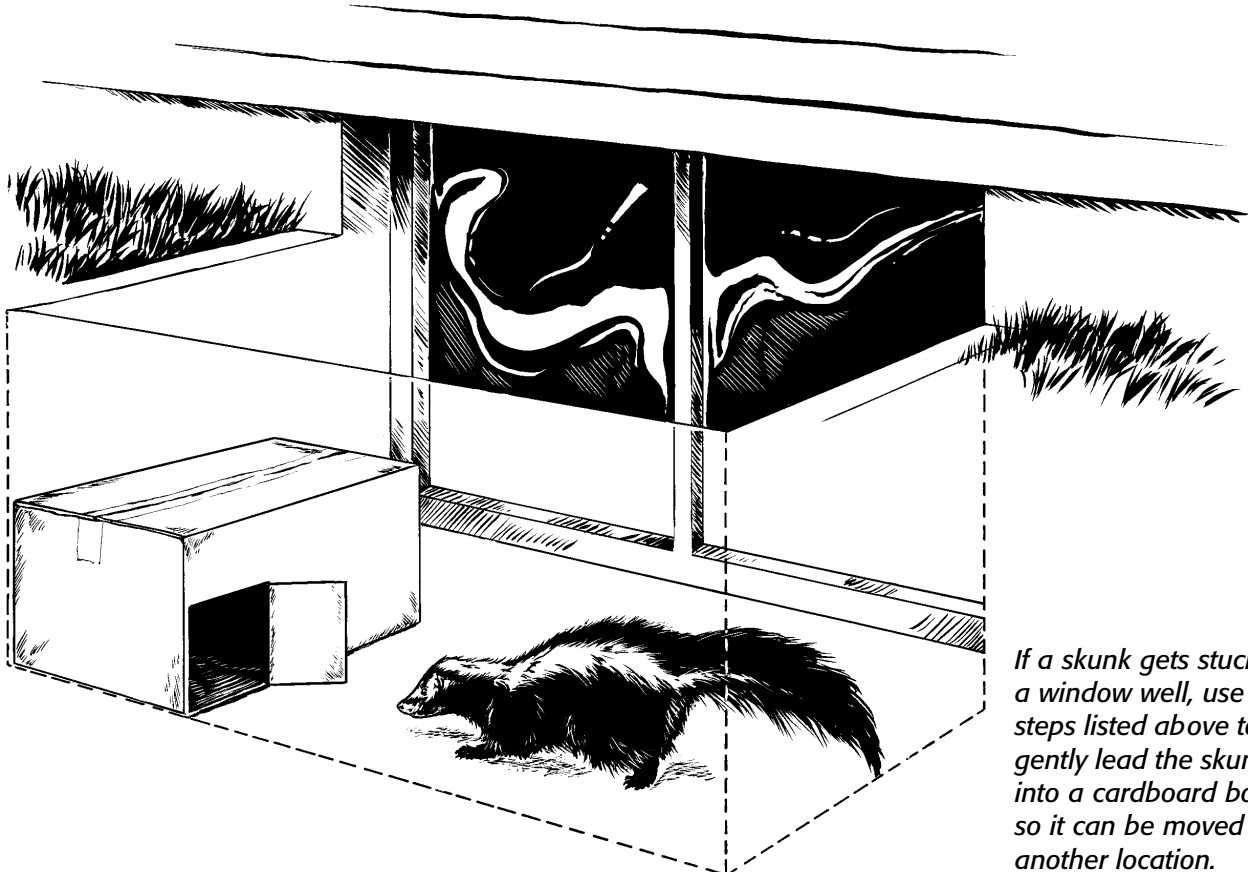
should be taken at least five miles away to be released.

Using wire cage traps

Neither foot-hold traps, commonly called steel traps, nor body-grip traps that kill the animal should be used to trap skunks under or around occupied houses. Skunks caught in these traps almost certainly will struggle and throw odor that will permeate the house and likely attract more skunks to the area.

Wire cage traps are the best way to remove skunks that are under a house. Although 12 x 12 x 36-inch traps can be used, the 9 x 9 x 24-inch trap is better because it can be placed in most locations. The lighter, more easily transported cage also minimizes problems with larger, nontarget animals.

When using cage traps, put



If a skunk gets stuck in a window well, use the steps listed above to gently lead the skunk into a cardboard box so it can be moved to another location.

cardboard, dark plastic or heavy paper around the top, bottom and sides, leaving the ends of the trap open. Cut a slot in the covering on top of the trap for the trap handle. Use masking or duct tape to hold the covering in place. The enclosed trap keeps the skunk quiet and makes it feel more secure so there is less chance of it spraying.

After placing the trap, check to make sure it springs easily and smoothly. Because skunks don't weigh very much, the trap should be adjusted so it takes very little pressure on the trigger to close the door.

Cage traps can be baited with sardines, cat food or table scraps if pets aren't around. Peanut butter is the best choice if dogs or cats are in the area.

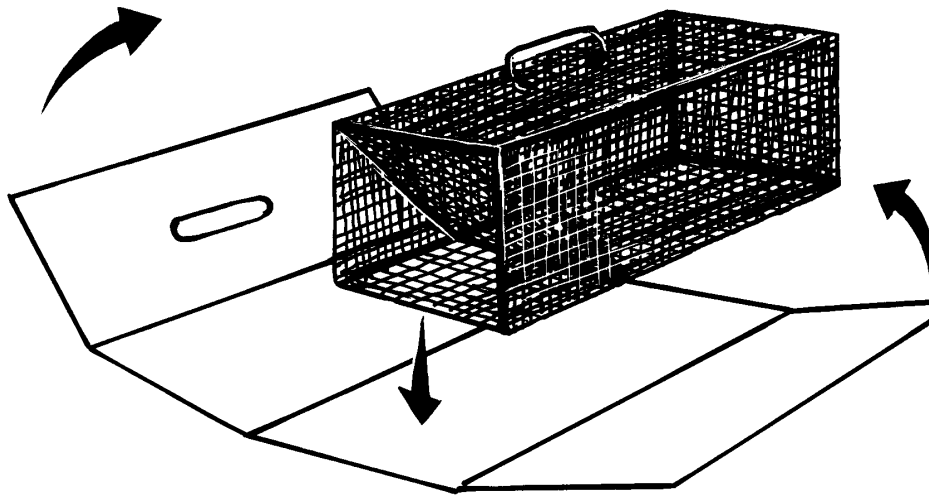
Trapping skunks that live under buildings

When trying to remove a skunk that is living under a building, it is best to trap it at that location. Baited traps away from the house usually don't work as well because they attract roving dogs and cats.

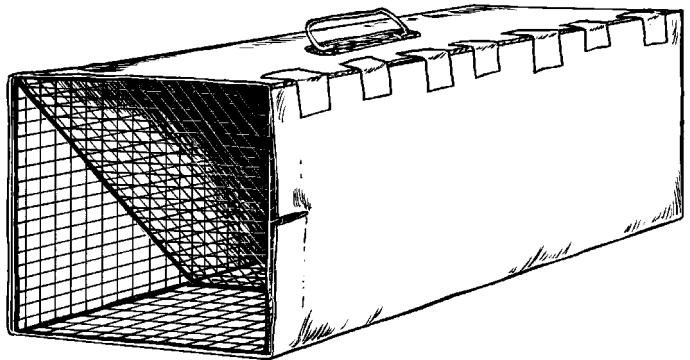
Place the trap so it faces the skunk's entrance or exit hole and can catch the skunk as it comes out from under the building. It may be necessary to place wood or cardboard on each side of the hole to lead the skunk to the mouth of the trap.

If several holes are found, place traps at each one. If you do not have enough traps to cover all the holes, put the trap at the hole that is used the most and temporarily block the others. Keep children, dogs and cats away from the set trap so they do not disturb the captured skunk.

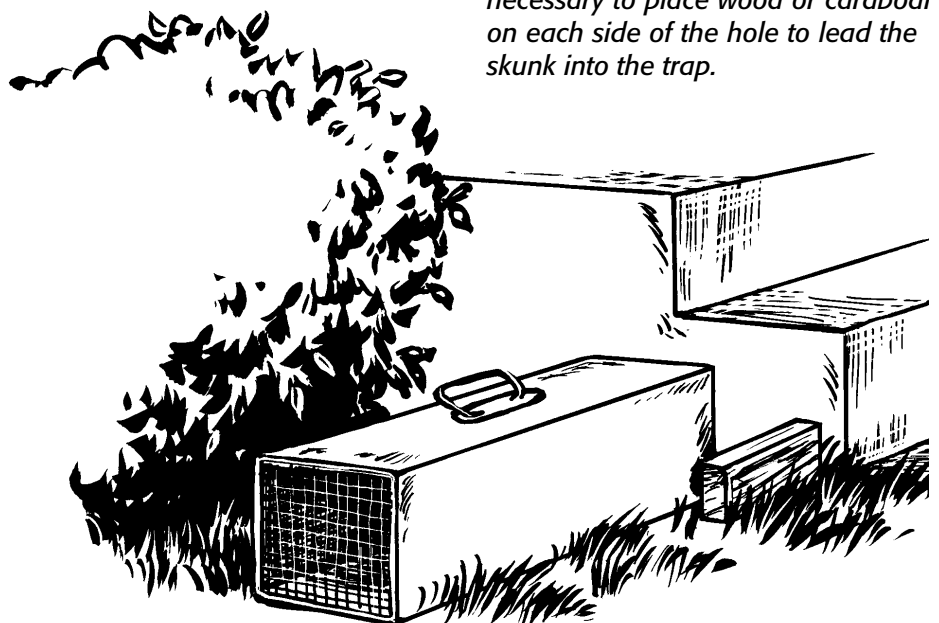
Remember to approach the trapped animal slowly, talking in a soothing voice, much as you would



A cardboard-enclosed cage trap helps keep a trapped skunk from becoming startled and spraying. Be sure to cut a hole in the top for the handle. Use masking tape to hold the cardboard in place. Dark plastic or heavy paper can be used in place of cardboard.



After enclosing the trap, place it so it faces an entrance or exit hole. It may be necessary to place wood or cardboard on each side of the hole to lead the skunk into the trap.



a pet. Do not shoot the skunk in the cage as this will cause the skunk to react and may compound the problem by attracting more skunks to the area.

When moving the trap away from the capture site, wear protective clothing, such as waders and long rubber boots or an old rain coat, to protect yourself if it should spray. In most cases, skunks can be approached slowly and transported without an problem in an enclosed open bed of a pickup truck.

Another transportation technique to avoid smell is for two people to each use a 6-foot piece of 9-gauge wire with a hook in the end to gently drag the trap away from the house and place it in a pickup bed.

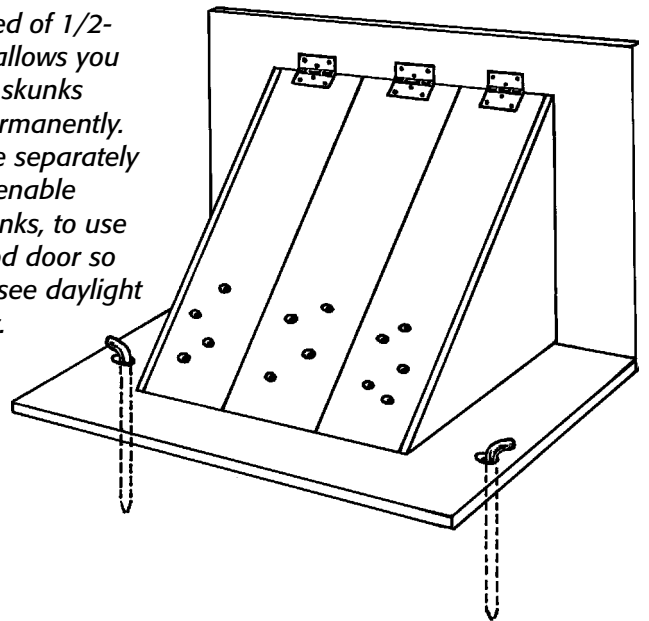
Since there is often only one skunk under a house, efforts should be continued until all signs of activity cease. It is not unusual to catch as many as six or more skunks at one site. Because skunks may not go out every night during the winter, especially during severe winter weather, traps should be left in place for several days.

Another approach to the situation, or to ensure all the skunks have been trapped, is to put a one-way door (shown at right) at the entrance before you seal the hole permanently. First place a piece of welded wire at the skunks' entrance, as shown on page 10. This will keep the skunks from digging a new hole beside the one-way door. Cut a flap in the woven wire for the door. Next, stake the door in place so it only opens to the outside. Sprinkle flour



pickup for transportation to another location.

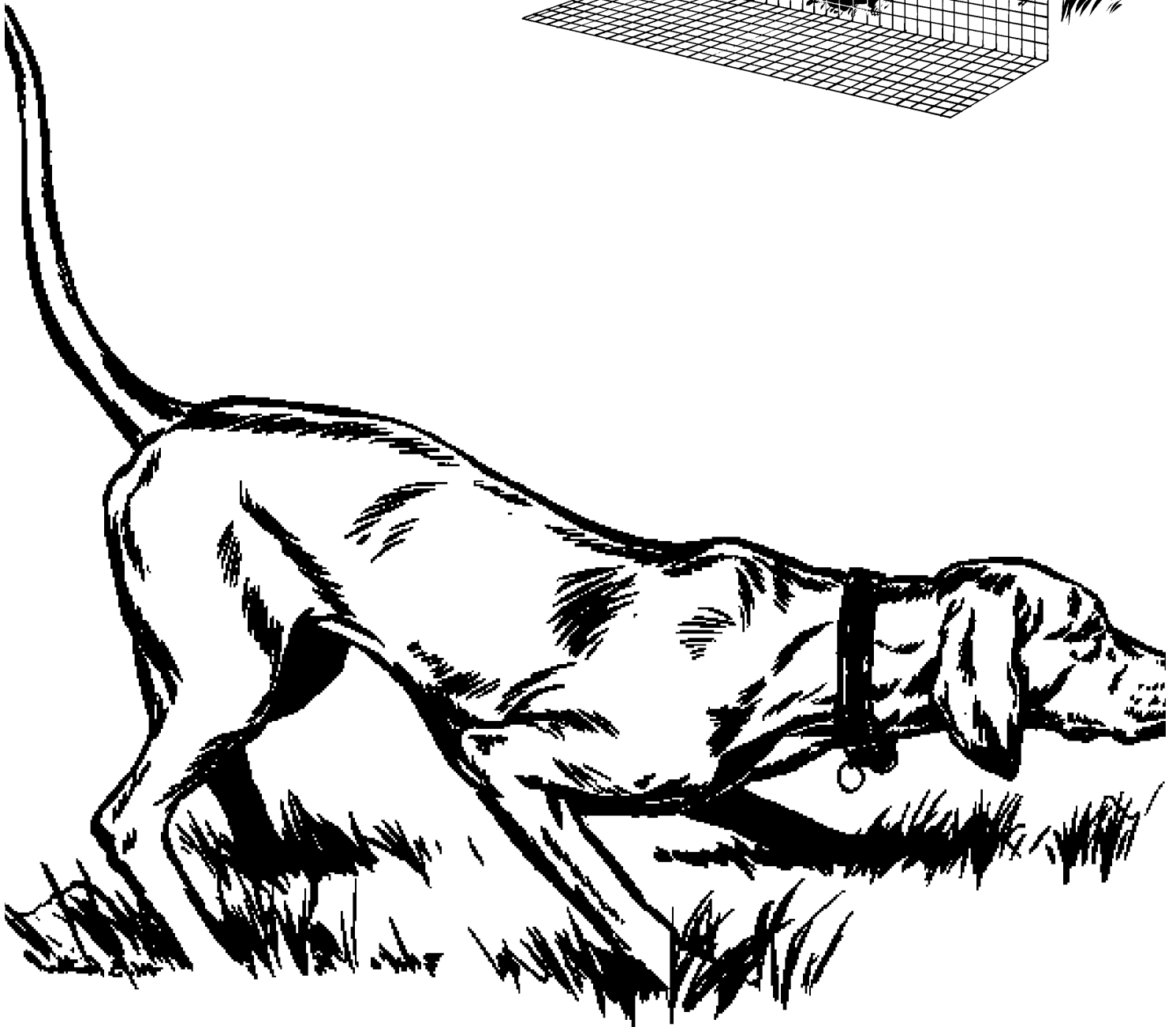
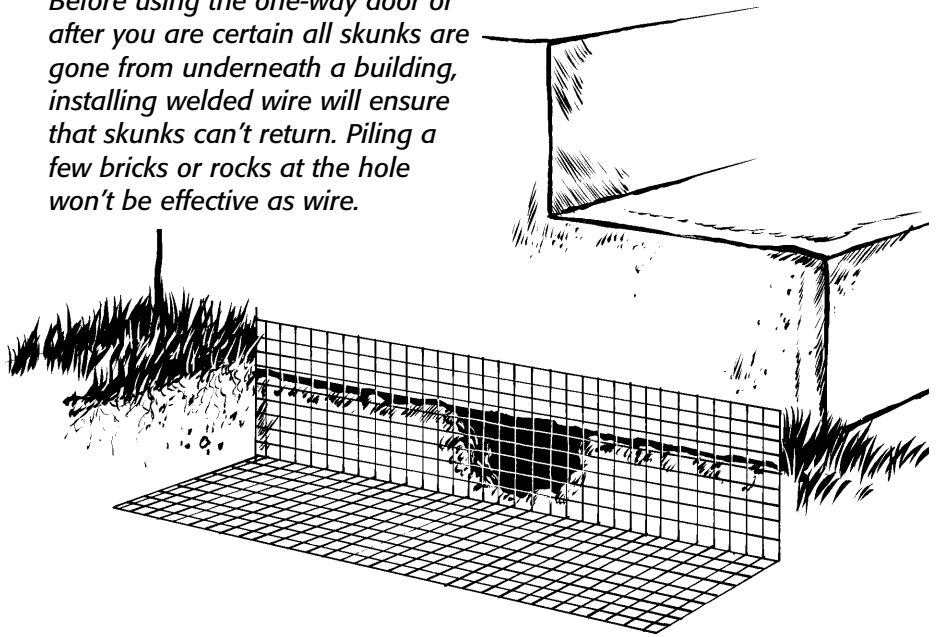
A one-way door, constructed of 1/2-inch or 3/4-inch plywood allows you to rid an enclosed area of skunks before sealing the hole permanently. Make the door out of three separately hinged pieces of wood to enable small, as well as large skunks, to use it. Drill holes in the plywood door so the skunks will be able to see daylight and recognize it as an exit.



inside and outside the door, which will allow you to see any activity around the hole.

After all of the skunks have left or been removed and there is no activity at the entrance/exit holes, the foundation should be securely sealed. Remove the one-way door, secure the flap in the wire apron and seal the hole.

Before using the one-way door or after you are certain all skunks are gone from underneath a building, installing welded wire will ensure that skunks can't return. Piling a few bricks or rocks at the hole won't be effective as wire.



Deodorizing skunk musk

Several deodorizing chemicals are available at pet stores that help dispel skunk odor in a house. Those that can be used as a spray are the most convenient. Orange or lemon fragrances are good choices for dispelling skunk odor, but you should read the label applications carefully. Some deodorizing chemicals list skunk odors as smells they eliminate, but

be aware that people with respiratory problems sometimes react to the chemicals. Common household deodorizers can be helpful in the house, especially if windows are opened and fans are used to help dispel the odor.

Some of the deodorizers are formulated to be used as shampoos on carpets, furniture or the family dog, if necessary.

Homemade deodorizer

Many different formulas have been suggested as homemade skunk deodorizers. The more common remedies include diluted solutions of tomato juice or vinegar to eliminate odor from people, clothing and pets.

The products mentioned above work to some extent, but the formula below, which can be made from items found in most households, is a much better solution.

Mix together:

1 quart of hydrogen peroxide

1/4 cup of baking soda

1 teaspoon liquid laundry soap or dishwashing detergent.

The first two ingredients form an alkaline peroxide that chemically changes the skunk essence into sulfonic acid, an odorless chemical. The soap breaks down the oily skunk essence and makes it more susceptible to the other chemicals.

Chemicals in this formula are harmless, but try this solution at your own risk. To be safe, keep the formula away from the eyes, nose and mouth of people and pets.

Caution: Do not store this homemade deodorizer or place it in a closed container. When kept in a warm place, the mixture may expand and burst the container.



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